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ABSTRACT

Five elementary school teachers were interviewed to determine their planning processes during the first weeks of school. Three phases were observed: 1) preparation of the physical environment of the classroom; 2) diagnosis and placement of students, and establishing behavior structures of the classroom; and, 3) planning academic activities and establishing a routine. Implications for teaching and teacher education are discussed. (JD)

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TEACHER PLANNING
IN THE FIRST WEEKS OF SCHOOL

Christopher M. Clark and Janis L. Elmore

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Abstract

This study is based on the assumption that a clear and vivid portrayal of classroom life is prerequisite to systematic improvement of practice. Toward such a portrayal, five elementary school teachers were interviewed regarding their weekly planning in the first weeks of school. Three phases of planning were observed and are described in this paper: (1) the Get Ready phase, where teachers were primarily concerned with preparing the physical environment of the classroom; (2) the Get Set phase, where teachers were concerned with diagnosis and placement of students and establishing the behavior structure of the classroom; and (3) the Go Phase, which signalled that the school year was getting under way, where teachers were planning academic activities and a routine was established in most classrooms. This descriptive study of teacher planning illuminates the process of planning in the first weeks of school and examines implications for teaching and teacher education.

Teacher Planning in the First Weeks of School

Christopher M. Clark and Janis L. Elmore[1]

Everyone agrees that it is important to get off to a good start at the beginning of the school year. Parents, administrators, students, and especially teachers invest a great deal of energy and imagination in starting the year off right. Much of the learning and social interaction that occur during the months after September can be traced directly or indirectly to the way in which the instructional and social systems were initially established during the first weeks of school.

The study reported here builds on these assumptions and documents how five elementary school teachers did their planning and preparation during the first weeks of school. This research is part of a larger project investigating several aspects of teacher planning, including teachers' use of judgment in selecting instructional materials, teacher planning for the teaching of writing, and survey research on the amount and variety of types of planning that teachers do (Clark & Yinger, Note 1). The project attempts to describe the content of various types of teacher planning. One of the goals of the project is to try to map the annual cycle of teacher planning from the teacher's perspective. This study of the first weeks of school provides a description of one section of this cycle. Subsequent reports will describe the content and process of teacher planning during the remainder of the school year.

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[1]Christopher M. Clark is the coordinator of IRT's Teacher Planning Project and an assistant professor of educational psychology and teacher education. Janis L. Elmore is a research intern with the Teacher Planning Project.

This research is not intended to be prescriptive: it is not intended to provide direct suggestions for how teachers ought to plan. Rather, we hope that our descriptions of how teachers plan in the early weeks of school will open a rich case literature to researchers, teacher educators, and teachers interested in improving the practice of teaching. We believe that a clear and vivid portrayal of classrooms is prerequisite to systematic improvement of practice.

The Study

Teachers

The data for our study of teacher planning during the first weeks of school come from interviews of five elementary school teachers teaching in the same school. The five teachers taught students in grades kindergarten, 2, 2-3, 4, and 5. Since teacher planning is not independent of the context in which it occurs, brief descriptions of each of the teachers and their classrooms follow.

The kindergarten teacher we interviewed had been teaching for two years. At the time of our interviews, he was planning to teach two kindergarten sections -- one in the morning and one in the afternoon.

The second-grade teacher was planning to teach in a self-contained classroom. She valued discipline and organization in her classroom. The emphasis of her teaching was the attainment of cognitive skills. She had six years teaching experience.

In contrast to the kindergarten and second-grade teachers, both of whom taught in self-contained classrooms, we also interviewed a teacher of a second/third-grade split class that met in a large open classroom.

The open classroom involved four teachers and approximately 110 children in grades 2 through 5. The teacher we interviewed had six years of teaching experience, including two years in this open classroom. Almost all of the students in this open classroom had been in the same split class during the previous school year. During that year, the open class served students from grades 1 through 5, but this year a decision was made to exclude first grade. The students were grouped into two second/third-grade groups and two fourth/fifth-grade groups. The four teachers in the open classroom met regularly to coordinate their planning and activity schedules and to share the work of creating and organizing the learning center activities shared by many or all of their students. During the summer preceding the school year under investigation, one planned change in the composition of this teacher team was made: one of the teachers requested reassignment to a self-contained first-grade classroom. Another female teacher who had previously taught a self-contained fourth-grade classroom joined the team.

The fourth-grade teacher we interviewed was a veteran of 26 years of teaching. We later learned that this was to be her last year of work before retirement. She taught a self-contained fourth grade and had done so for a number of years. The only major difference between the year under study and the recent past was that she was implementing a new mathematics curriculum.

The fifth-grade teacher we interviewed was also a very experienced teacher, with almost 30 years of classroom experience. He taught in a self-contained classroom and took upon himself the responsibility for preparing his students to enter middle school, where he had taught for many years.

The Interviews

The interviews for this study were conducted in early October. The five teachers were interviewed separately, each in his or her own classroom. Each teacher was asked to recall and describe his or her planning for each week of the school year, beginning with the week before the students arrived. For each week the teachers reported the focus of their planning and the thoughts and events that influenced their plans. Plan books, class schedules, and other documents aided the teachers in reconstructing their planning.

Three Phases of Teacher Planning

We found that the planning done during the first weeks of school by the teachers we interviewed could be divided into three relatively distinct periods or phases. These phases were characterized by different concerns or topics of teacher planning. Of course, there were individual differences among the five teachers in their planning concerns and in the timing of their planning. But, by and large, a pattern of planning activity emerged that was common to all of the teachers. We have labeled these phases or periods of planning (1) the "Get Ready" Phase, (2) the "Get Set" Phase, and (3) the "Go" Phase. Our description of teacher planning during the early weeks of school is organized into these three phases, providing a framework for the more detailed description of similarities and differences in teacher planning. The first weeks of school referred to in this study include the week immediately preceding the actual beginning of school and the four subsequent weeks.

Phase I. Get Ready

Teacher planning in the Get Ready Phase took place primarily during the week before the students arrived. The planning dilemma faced during Phase I was, "How can I best organize the classroom setting so that the first days of school will be as smooth and enjoyable as possible for me and my students?"

Physical classroom environment. All five teachers reported that their first week of planning was concerned with the physical environment of the classroom.

The kindergarten teacher spent considerable time planning and setting up high interest play activities in different corners of the classroom. His hope was that every child would be drawn to an activity or toy in one part of the room rather than wandering aimlessly. Getting the room set up and getting the classroom organized were also mentioned high on the second-grade teacher's list of planning topics.

The second/third-grade teacher, like the others we interviewed, spent a good deal of planning time on the physical arrangement of her classroom. She reported that she checked carefully to see that there were enough desks, prepared bulletin boards, planned learning centers, and made name tags for all students and attached them to their desks. Her rationale for this planning and organized activity was that she wanted to make the room look cheerful so that her students would feel very comfortable upon arrival.

During the week before school began, the fourth-grade teacher expressed less concern about planning for the physical environment of the classroom than the other four teachers we interviewed did. Her mention of bulletin boards was the only indication of her concern with this dimension of teacher planning and instruction.

The metaphor of a hardware store, of which he was the proprietor, was the way the fifth-grade teacher described his planning and concern for the physical environment of the classroom. His planning task was to inventory his stock of materials and to refresh himself on how to retrieve any given item quickly. Getting ready also involved setting up a workable arrangement of desks and chairs, and allotting space for his planned learning centers.

Reviewing files and organizing academic materials. For all five teachers, getting ready during the week before school began included planning to review files and organize academic materials and activities, especially those associated with the new math curriculum. The second-grade teacher was the most concerned with getting her files of academic materials in order, and especially with learning the new math curriculum. It is interesting to note that this new curriculum was also being tried out for the first time by the kindergarten teacher, but he made no mention of spending significant planning time on it during the week before school began. The second-grade teacher was especially concerned with the teaching of mathematics, and attended an inservice workshop on the new math curriculum during the week immediately preceding Labor Day.

To a lesser extent, the fourth-grade teacher was also concerned with checking over materials to have on hand for both herself and her students. The fifth-grade teacher reported spending considerable time getting his files in order so that he would know where everything could be found, checking to see that he had a sufficient number of handouts, and that his bookshelves were in order.

Student motivation. This was another concern the teachers addressed during both their first and second weeks of planning. It was expressed by the fourth-grade teacher in a rather abstract fashion, that is, she was concerned with getting off to a good start with her students but she did not mention any specific plans for activities that would accomplish the goal. The kindergarten teacher's reason for attending to the physical environment of the classroom was to make students comfortable and to motivate them; throughout his planning there was a recurring theme of student motivation. The second/third grade teacher also planned ways to make the first two days of school especially pleasant for her students. Her strategy for accomplishing this was to plan one "fun" activity for the first and second days of school so that her students would be excited and enthused about the coming year.

Similarities and differences among the teachers. Although all of the teachers expressed some concern with planning to get off to a good start, the emphasis and rationale for their planning differed. The second- and fifth-grade teachers' planning focused on the physical environment and the arranging and obtaining of academic materials. The second/third-grade teacher and the kindergarten teacher also planned for the physical environment of the classroom and for obtaining academic materials, but they were also planning ways to motivate their students. The fourth-grade teacher was concerned with starting the students off right, but did not articulate a plan to achieve this end.

The kindergarten and the second/third-grade teachers' planning were centered on a concern that the students feel welcome and motivated. A different emphasis was seen in the second and fifth-grade teachers' reasons for planning. These teachers were more concerned with

establishing themselves in the classroom. The goal of their planning was to work more efficiently in their teacher role. Planning the physical environment and arranging classroom materials were means to this end.

Several teachers planned what they hoped would be sure-fire, exciting, engaging, and enjoyable activities for the first two days of school. The rationale seemed to be that if their students had positive first experiences in the class, then an attitude of cooperation would be established and persist for the remainder of the year. The teachers' concern with cooperativeness as an index of the quality of the first several weeks of school and a predictor of things to come supports Doyle's (Note 2) notion that perhaps cooperativeness is one of the most important process and outcome variables in classroom life.

Phase II: Get Set

The Get Set Phase of teacher planning for the school year took place largely during the first and second weeks of school (when the students had actually arrived).

Student pretesting. One of the major activities during Phase II was pretesting of students, especially in reading and mathematics. It was both formal (i.e., standardized assessment measures) and informal (teacher judgments based on work samples in the early days of school). All of the teachers used this pretesting as a form of diagnosis to help them decide which students should work with which levels of the curriculum.

The kindergarten teacher's plans for the first week of school reflected his concern with diagnosis and placement, as well as his continued interest in motivating his students. He planned activities of short duration and high motivation, involving success for all students.

He directed group songs involving hand or body movements and short, high motivation language arts activities. He observed his students for diagnostic purposes during these activities. This theme of diagnosis of language ability and gross and fine motor development was also reflected in short activities involving coloring.

Another example of concern with placement is illustrated by the second-grade teacher's plans. She received test scores from the previous spring for her students in reading and math. She used and took seriously the placement information provided. In addition, she informally tested her students in reading, writing, and communication skills. She also mentioned that she was on the lookout for children who might need special help from the school counselor, the reading specialist, the Title I program, or other sources.

The second/third-grade teacher was concerned with planning to administer an elaborate set of placement tests for reading during the first week of school. She individually administered these tests, and saw them as prerequisite to any systematic reading instruction. She was very concerned with student placement at appropriate reading levels and diagnosis of student abilities and achievement in reading; she evidenced this by continuing with the series of individualized reading tests, and mentioning that the Language Experiences in Reading (LEIR) kits on which her students began work were usable because they "didn't require pretests to begin."

Placement was a major planning concern during the first full week of school for the fourth-grade teacher we interviewed. She reported that she had received information from the teachers who taught her students during the previous year about their levels of reading ability. In

addition, she began an elaborate testing program for reading diagnosis and placement during the second week of school. She administered her own spelling placement test and collected handwriting samples.

The fifth-grade teacher reported doing informal surveying of math, writing, and oral reading skills to see where his students needed help, what level of material they could handle successfully, and which of them might need special tutoring assistance. His students experienced a considerable amount of testing (including both reading and math) during the first full week of school. In his planning, the fifth-grade teacher reported that he used the "necessary evil of pretesting" as an opportunity to assess the social side of his students because he believed that students show different sides of their personalities and peer relationships under the stress and tension of testing. This was an exceptional and imaginative way of thinking about and using the testing and assessment time to gain some insight into the social dynamics of the class and thus inform subsequent planning.

The classroom behavior structure. In addition to conducting student assessment during the Get Set Phase, the teachers planned for training their students to work within the behavior structure of the classroom, that is, the rules and procedures necessary to operate successfully in all of the different settings and activities likely to occur. All the teachers we interviewed were experienced, and they each had their own ideas about what the classroom rules and behavior structure should be.

The second-grade teacher planned to set demanding routines and strict rules during the early part of the school year, with the idea that she might be able to relax the rules later in the year if appropriate and necessary.

Both the kindergarten and fifth-grade teacher had unique plans for training students in the behavior structure. The kindergarten teacher emphasized cleanup. He planned to review the procedures for cleanup at the end of each day. The fifth-grade teacher planned to institute a behavior system he had developed over the years. This was a very elaborate system involving color-coded cards, a bell, and signals using the overhead lights to indicate what kinds of activities and sets of rules were in operation at any given time of the day. He reported that he would much rather plan to spend time initially training his students to learn this elaborate system than change the system, because the system had worked well for him in the past.

This statement summarized well the teachers' attitudes toward establishing the behavior structures in their classrooms, that is, student input in shaping behavior structures was minimal. In their planning, the teachers were preoccupied with making implicit rules explicit and with strict, consistent enforcement of these rules during the initial days of school.

Phase III. Go

This third phase of teacher planning begins with the second full week of school and continues for at least two more weeks. The planning dilemma for the teacher in the Go Phase was, "Now that I have gotten started, How is this first attempt at a system for instruction going to work; what changes do I have to make before things can really get rolling for the rest of the year?"

Establishing routines and schedules. A major concern of the Go Phase was establishing a routine or workable daily and weekly schedule. One difficulty in establishing this schedule was planning around the

required testing program. In addition, the second/third-grade teachers' planned weekly schedule was disrupted by the unexpected departure of the other second/third-grade team teacher in the open classroom. This interferred with plans for grouping students for various subject matters and sharing the teaching load. All of the plans this teacher had negotiated with her teammate became unworkable and she found herself in the almost impossible position of teaching two classes simultaneously, while also trying to coordinate the work of substitute teachers who were often unfamiliar with the curricula to be taught and the procedures idiosyncratic to this open classroom.

During the Go Phase the second- and fifth-grade teachers developed master plans for the week. The fifth-grade teacher posted his plan at the front of the classroom. This plan took about five weeks for the teacher to develop. The second-grade teacher listed her plans and schedule for reading on the chalkboard. She expected her students to refer to this, and monitor and guide their behavior according to it. However, she did not communicate her weekly schedule to the students. She was concerned with fine tuning her schedule before publicly announcing it and posting a copy at the front of the room.

Another planning concern during the Go Phase was academic activities. By the fifth week of school, the teachers had finished much of their testing of students and were able to place them in reading and other academic groups. The teachers were planning activities in all subject matter areas. The fifth-grade teacher was particularly concerned with the teaching of new writing and mathematics curricula. He noted that his planning, particularly for mathematics instruction, was delayed because

he was waiting for an inservice workshop before he felt prepared to implement the new curricula. This was also the case for the fourth-grade teacher.

By the end of the Go Phase of planning (about the beginning of October), all the teachers we interviewed had established a workable daily and weekly routine, assigned students to groups for those parts of the curriculum in which they used grouping, and begun to talk about and think of their classes as collectives rather than aggregations of individuals. They were able to assess the group's potential for the coming year, identify students with special needs (e.g., school counselor assistance, Title I reading help), and were willing to speculate about the kind of year this would be compared to last year. In short, the important business of getting off to a good start was over and the planning and teaching tasks ahead could proceed within the framework established during the first weeks of school.

Implications for Practice

At least four other studies support the notion that the social and instructional organization of a classroom is established rapidly during the first days and weeks of the school year (Tickunoff & Ward, Note 3; Buckley & Cooper, Note 4; Anderson & Evertson, Note 5; Shultz & Florio, 1979). These studies show that establishing the basic classroom organization, rules, procedures, and routines constitutes the business of the first weeks of September and forms a framework within which the work of the remainder of the school year is planned, organized, experienced, and evaluated. The present study was designed to examine these crucial initial weeks of school and provide some insight into how classroom life comes to take the shape that it does.

These first weeks of school illustrate the extent to which teachers are concerned with planning. The teachers in our study were already planning their school year at least a week before their students arrived. Although other studies have investigated teacher planning, they have concentrated on describing curricular planning (e.g., Smith & Sendelbach, Note 6). As described earlier in this report, we found that much of the teacher planning during the first weeks of school was concerned with developing the social as well as curricular aspects of the classroom. Social planning concerns and planning of the classroom community were often incorporated in curricular plans, but the teachers also planned with social activities or cooperativeness as the focal points.

That teachers are concerned with taking a lead role in establishing a community in their classrooms is not a unique finding, but the fact that they carefully plan this environment as well as curricular activities provides insight into the teacher's dilemma of how to work with the inevitable interaction between social and curricular concerns in the classroom.

Preservice Teacher Education

Teacher educators should consider the importance of the first weeks of school when scheduling the student teaching experience. Presently, student teachers enter the classroom after "things have settled down." This prevents them from observing and partaking in the first weeks of planning that may largely determine the character of the classroom. The typical practicum experience provides some training in operating the classroom system in a steady state, after almost all of the structural properties of the classroom have crystalized. How much more challenging and professionally relevant it would be to train prospective teachers

in planning, organizing, and getting the year off to a good start. In cases in which actual field experience in planning and organizing the first weeks of school is not possible for preservice candidates, simulation exercises could be developed that provide some training and practice in this important domain of professional activity.

Practice in planning and organizing the first weeks of school becomes especially important if we take seriously the notion that the school and its programs should reflect and be responsive to the values, cultural background, and social milieu of the community of which it is a part. This suggests that new teachers at a school should spend at least some part of the late summer getting to know the community, visiting the homes of their prospective students, and grounding their instructional and social system decisions in the reality of the larger community in which their students live.

Inservice Teacher Education

Our data give us the clear impression that the first weeks of school are the most complex and cognitively demanding weeks of a teacher's year. How can we help even experienced teachers to simplify and better manage their classrooms and themselves during this period? Our reflections on the teacher interviews suggest three areas in which relief and support seem desirable: (1) the timing of inservice workshops, (2) the uses of placement testing, and (3) heightened awareness of the importance and demands of teacher planning during this period, especially by administrators.

All five of the teachers we interviewed were implementing at least one new curriculum at the beginning of the interview period. Two of the teachers delayed their implementation of a new math curriculum for up to five weeks because they were awaiting an inservice workshop on how

to use it. The other three teachers began to use their new curricula very conservatively, following the teacher's guide meticulously with almost no adaptation of the curriculum to the uniqueness of their students and classroom. Given the circumstances of no prior experience with the new curricula and a sense of urgency about getting started on academic activities, these teachers behaved in a reasonable way. But the situation could have been considerably improved if the new curricula had been comprehensively introduced, "walked through," and analyzed by the teachers during the previous spring. Under these circumstances, the teachers would have been able to adapt these new curricula to the characteristics of their students and other circumstances peculiar to their classrooms rather than sit and wait or implement without adaptation.

Placement testing and student assessment emerged as important factors in teacher planning during the first weeks of school. Formal achievement testing was characterized as a "necessary evil"--necessary because it is mandated by the district or the State Department of Education and evil because it takes away from instructional time and is a threatening, tiring, and demanding experience for students that dampens any early enthusiasm for school learning.

One of the teachers made a virtue of necessity by using achievement testing as an opportunity to learn how his students worked under pressure. Generally, though, the teachers did not seem to use test results in their planning for instruction, except in grouping decisions for reading instruction. This suggests that a combination of inservice training in ways to use test results in instructional decision-making and a review of the timing and redundancy of placement and achievement testing could help simplify the teacher's job in the first weeks of school.

Interruptions from outside the classroom and unanticipated schedule changes can make the already difficult first weeks of school a nightmare for the classroom teacher. Our description of teacher planning in the first weeks of school should alert school principals and other administrators to the need for minimizing these interruptions and protecting their teachers and students during the critical early weeks. In the school in which we did our research, this was reasonably well done, but it is easy to imagine a situation much less conductive to getting off to a good start.

These findings offer further evidence that planning provides a window on the mental lives of teachers, enabling researchers to better understand and document how teachers make decisions and adapt curricula and instruction to fit the unique needs and conditions of their classrooms. We hope that this study and additional research on planning, grounded in the actual experiences of teachers, will provide teacher educators, school administrators, and teachers themselves with a set of concepts and ideas that they can think from and apply to the improvement of teacher preparation and professional development.

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